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Nicholas Sammond, *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation*

Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2015, 400 pages

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1 In 2007, the Christopher P. Lehman stated that American animation owes its existence to African Americans due to the prevalence of their negative depictions and caricatures in early cartoons. According to the author, these visual incarnations of a humor relying on ethnic jokes dominated without a doubt the emerging motion picture industry, including the animated films. Eight years later (2015), Nicholas Sammond goes into this topic in depth with his book *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation*. He argues that most of the famous early animation characters – Mickey Mouse, Felix the Cat, Bugs Bunny – carried distinguishing visual and acting features inherited from the American Blackface Minstrelsy practice.

2 Rather than being just organized into "regular" chapters, the *Birth of an Industry's* content is divided according to the four major themes that have conditioned the existence of cartoon minstrels characters. The first theme "Performance" retells the story of the pioneer animators and their multidimensional work as vaudeville actors, magicians and cartoonists. The author especially emphasizes the roles of Winsor McCay and James Stuart Blackton, two of the most popular cartoonists-performers who "placed animation firmly in the tradition of the lightning-sketch" (45) during the preindustrial animation era (before the 1920s) and regularly crossed the mobile boundaries separating different medias such as comic strips, films, live performances

and cartoons. One of the most apparent reflections of the animators' diverse influences relies on formal and substantive conventions of the early cartoons – such as "self-reflexivity, the permeability of screen boundaries, the interplay between the animated character and its creator..." (57) – which were nothing less than adaptations of the vaudeville / blackface minstrelsy tropes to the animation medium.

3 The second part of the Nicholas Sammond's study entitled "Labor" is the most innovative as the author focuses not only on the on-screen minstrel characters representations or the history of them, but also puts the light on the growing American cartoon industry production conditions.

4 According to the author, the transformation of American social spaces of entertainment from vaudeville theaters to movie palaces and the animation world entered in its industrialization phase through the application of the Fordist factory model, occurred at the same time. The evolution of material and human organization conditions deeply modified the animators working environment as well as the content of their creations "not just in terms of popular continuing characters but also in the formulation of animate space" (111). The introduction of sound during the 1920s coupled with the transformation of a craft modeled art form to an industry turned artists-performers to workers. Consequently, Nicholas Sammond maintains that this parallel development urged animators to use minstrel characters – which the author associated with the depictions of "rebellious slaves and their descendants" (89) who resisted to unfree labor through subversive and playful behaviors – as implicit witnesses of their own social condition. From the short-length Disney's animated film *Steamboat Willie* (1928), new sound synchronization process to images was a marker of the increasing division of labor in animation as well as a quick standardization of the industry's practices. This specific climate created the conditions for the use of ethnic and racial jokes / stereotypes on a regular basis. The latter "succeeded because they were legible to audiences of the day but also because they made efficient use of the limited narrative structure of the gag cartoon" (124). In other words, the tropes and conventions from Blackface Minstrelsy (white gloves, black plasmatic bodies, wide eyes and mobile mouths) were applied by animators to their creations in order to express a playful resistance to the working environment they had to regularly deal with.

5 The third section, "Space", gets back to this notion of space as a "product" whose manifestations could be graphic and visible, or more subtle and internalized. Nicholas Sammond applies the latter case to the historical shift from silent movies spaces to talking ones during the late 1920s. By reorganizing the "economic, cultural and social spaces of moviemaking and moviegoing in the early sound era" (136), animated cartoons have entirely rebuild the existing links between the (real) spaces where the movies were created, the filmic ones made by representations and the theatrical ones where the audience received those films. The author argues that short films, including cartoons, should be considered as "transitional spaces" as they mark the gradual elimination of live performance in movie theaters. This is the reason why on the one hand, vaudeville starts to lose grounds to the movies but continued to largely inspire animators' representations of race, class and gender issues until the 1940s on the other hand. Nicholas Sammond also discusses the vaudeville's relationship to animation and their common use of ethnic stereotypes. The author bases his statement on the work of the animation historian Donald Crafton and asserts that all of the animation studios of the late 1920s-1930s period "depicted wily Chinamen, lazy Mexicans, simpering Jews,

drunken Irishmen, and so on, either in human or thinly veiled animal form" (160). The transposition from vaudeville calibrated expressions of ethnicity and race – especially towards African Americans and their negative depictions – to the screen put the cartoons in the particular position of transitional objects which carried a shift in representational practices and their associated spaces. Many animated short films like *Swing You Sinners!* (1930) highlight perfectly the existing bridge between a "segregated imaginary of filmed entertainment and the Jim Crow world" (173) in which these movies were exhibited, watched and consumed. Such films created spaces that affirmed segregation in both physical and internalized way and set an harmony between real and internalized separations. As the 1930s progressed and the popularity of swing music increased among white audiences, the vaudevillian African American minstrel caricatures in cartoons became vestigial and handed over to a broader racist imagery made of jungle, plantation and ghetto spaces. According to Nicholas Sammond, cartoon minstrel characters such as Bimbo, Mickey Mouse, Felix or Bugs Bunny continued to "visually and gesturally act as minstrels but over time lose a direct association with blackface itself" (183). This evolution coupled with the creation of a fantasy world where "black" spaces – particularly Harlem, the Deep South and Africa – formed a contiguous world relying on African and African American caricatures.

6 The last part of the book is dedicated to the topic of race portrayal in 1930s animated films. Using more specifically the example of Mickey Mouse in *Trader Mickey* (1932), the author analyzes the mental and visual combination of African American cultural traits with some racist stereotypes (fear, violence, lust, stupidity of black characters). He asserts that because of their ambiguous use of mixed signals, the more vituperative clichés could be found in jazz cartoons like *Scrub Me Mama with a Boogie Beat* (1937) or *Tin Pan Alley Cats* (1943). By their resort to typical African American musical and cultural elements during violent or spooky animated sequences, cartoonists linked jazz to death, decay and / or blatantly racist form of ethnic humor that combines fear and desire of black bodies. Nicholas Sammond considers the use of African American animated stereotype to be a "commodity fetish, a crystallization of social and material relations, a way to effectively and efficiently sell a gag". (244) Indeed, the shortness of vaudeville routines and animated cartoons allowed actors and animators to transmit a thick package of social, ethnic and cultural representations to their respective audience in only a few minutes. This probably explains why the common tropes and practices of blackface minstrelsy in early American animation were so regularly used by cartoonists.

7 To conclude, the main concern of Nicholas Sammond is to examine the American cartoon production and figurative processes in the light of the blackface minstrelsy practice. The originality of this work verges on a comparative method and on the analysis of intermediality which took place between animated films and vaudeville. Despite its numerous strengths, *Birth of an Industry* suffers sometimes from minor limits. Due to the meticulous work and the large amount of material used to build a solid argumentation, it is sometimes a little bit confusing for non-specialists in aesthetics. Moreover, the author's conclusion – mostly through a case study on the movie *Tropic Thunder* (2008) – opens the discussion about the current filmic legacy of blackface minstrelsy. Well-written and enriching, this part seems nevertheless in disharmony with the rest of the book and its very specific focus. *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* is however highly relevant,

accurate and worth reading as it is a key work in the field of both American animation and ethnic studies.

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